



SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER  
**ALLY TRAINING HUB**  
Virginia Department of Social Services

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# Worker Self-Care and Secondary Trauma

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# Outline

- Secondary trauma
- Prevention and intervention
- Trauma informed self care
- Guidance for supervisors

# Secondary Trauma

- A result of one's exposure to someone else's trauma
- The more often you are exposed to someone else's trauma, the more likely you are to experience secondary trauma
- Symptoms mirror those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):
  - Avoidance, Arousal, Negative Thoughts, Intrusion, Fear, Chronic Fatigue, Guilt, Hopelessness, Anger/Cynicism, Sleeplessness
- Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue take a toll on team and individual performance

# Who is at Risk of Secondary Trauma

- Up to 50% of child welfare workers
- Any professional working with a traumatized population, including therapists
- Women are at greater risk
- Individuals who display a higher sense of empathy are at greater risk
- Characteristics that could make experiencing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue more likely:
  - Personal history of trauma
  - Fewer years of professional experience
  - Younger age
  - Workload
  - Salary
  - Supervisory support

# What is Compassion Satisfaction?

- Compassion satisfaction protects against secondary trauma
- Positive benefits received from direct work or contact with vulnerable populations
- Compassion satisfaction includes **feelings of pleasure resulting from helping others**
- Individuals experiencing compassion satisfaction usually report a strong belief in the importance of their position in helping others

# Assessing For Secondary Trauma

- Useful tool for quick self-assessment
- Professional Quality of Life Measure (ProQOL)
  - Measures compassion satisfaction v. compassion fatigue
- When you help people, you have direct contact with their lives. As you may have found, your compassion for those you help can affect you in positive and negative ways
- These are questions about your experiences, both positive and negative, as a social worker

# Preventing Secondary Trauma

- Clinical supervision
- Ongoing training
- Self care
- Balanced caseloads
- Use of evidence-based practices
- Exercise
- Good nutrition
- Psychoeducation
- Self reporting screening

# Intervention for Secondary Trauma

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Mindfulness
- Balancing of caseload
- Change in job assignment
- Referrals to Employee Assistance Program or outside resources
- Meetings following a crisis to allow for discussions



# What is Compassion Fatigue?

- Characterized by
  - Depersonalization
  - Emotional exhaustion
  - Cynicism
  - Lack of effectiveness
  - Depletion of emotional resources and personal energy
- Caused by chronic exposure or work with vulnerable populations
- Can lead to a decrease in
  - Job satisfaction
  - Performance
  - Commitment to the organization

# COVID-19's Contribution to Compassion Fatigue

For Clients:

- Client needs are increasing as services simultaneously decrease
- COVID-19 has highlighted the immediate impact of racism in medicine and other spaces, which weighs on many of those we serve
- Feeling the effects of unemployment, illness, and mental health concerns related to COVID-19

# COVID-19's Contribution to Compassion Fatigue

## For Staff:

- Unlike frontline medical workers, many social workers have been asked to move their offices into their homes, erasing many work-life boundaries
- Staff not trained to work in chronic pandemic conditions via technology from home
- Can feel guilty prioritizing their own well-being in the face of the personal, institutional, and political crises affecting their clients
- Have limited physical interactions, limited opportunities to receive support of colleagues, and have few opportunities to debrief their sensitive work

# Workplace Practices to Help Reduce Compassion Fatigue

- Flexible or compressed work schedules
- Meaningful, trauma informed supervision
- Remote work options

# Trauma Informed Self Care

- Practices that help one manage their physical and emotional wellbeing
- Understanding and identifying the impact that trauma has on individuals and families and responding to effects of trauma exposure
- Trauma informed training is correlated with increased compassion satisfaction and decreased compassion fatigue

# Trauma Informed Self Care Practices

- There are a number of key trauma informed self care practices
  - Regular and supportive supervision
  - Peer support
  - Working as a team

# Being Trauma Informed: Core Competencies for Supervisors

- Identify signs, symptoms, and risk factors of secondary trauma
- Have knowledge of support options that include Employee Assistance Programs or other supportive services
- Self assess, address, and monitor secondary trauma
- Encourage staff to share emotional experiences in a safe and supportive manner
- Model appropriate self disclosure to respond to traumatic event
- Differentiate between
  - Anticipated changes in perspectives
  - Cognitive distortions related to secondary trauma exposure

# Specialized Training in Child Welfare

- Leads to
  - higher rates of satisfaction for front line staff
  - staff that are more satisfied in supervisory/ leadership roles
  - staff that are less likely to develop feelings of depersonalization



# Fostering Supervisor Support and Self Care

- Ensure staff have weekly (or at minimum biweekly) one-on-one meetings with supervisors
  - If possible, make these meetings face to face
- Continue to meet as a team, even if these meetings are virtual
- Important for individuals to have their teammates to discuss and share workload for difficult cases
- Important that staff remain connected with their peers
- Express appreciation for staff during these difficult times



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## For more information

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